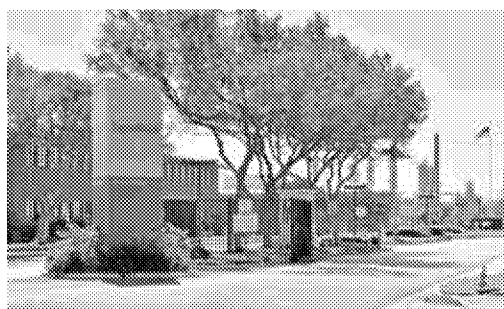


Lawmakers raise concerns over study of toxic acid at ExxonMobil refinery in Torrance

By Nick Green, Daily Breeze

Monday, May 9, 2016



As ExxonMobil prepared to embark on the inherently risky restart of its Torrance refinery Monday night, two South Bay congressional representatives added their voices to concerns expressed by local residents over a regulatory study of toxic hydrofluoric acid.

Reps. Ted Lieu and Maxine Waters wrote a letter Monday to the South Coast Air Quality Management District, which is studying safer alternatives than the use of the acid. When exposed to air in high enough quantities, the acid can form a toxic, ground-hugging cloud that could kill or injure thousands.

In the 1990s, the refinery employed MHF that contained 30 percent of an additive that helps stop formation of the vapor. But in the wake of production problems, city officials quietly signed off on the use of just 10 percent of the additive shortly afterward without telling residents of the increased risk they could face.

In the letter released exclusively to the Southern California News Group, the two said “the study fails to address several critical issues, including whether the current MHF catalyst modified with only 10 percent additive even works as intended.

“Does adding 10 percent additive make most, some or none of the MHF drop to the ground if released?” the letter reads in part. “No one knows at this point.

“One cannot reasonably compare alternative catalysts without knowing if the current MHF catalyst even works,” the letter adds. “The study also cannot reasonably evaluate MHF as a possible catalyst without knowing what amount of additives would work to keep the acid from spreading as a vapor throughout the surrounding community.”

Federal regulators have said Torrance only narrowly escaped a catastrophic release of thousand of pounds of the acid during the February 2015 explosion that crippled the refinery’s ability to manufacture gasoline.

The force of the 1.7-magnitude blast lobbed an 80,000-pound piece of debris that could have ruptured the large tanks containing the acid, but were stopped by a piece of temporary scaffolding surrounding them erected for forthcoming maintenance.

“There are alternatives to the use of HF that could be implemented,” former U.S. Chemical Safety Board Chairman Rafael Moure-Eraso said last week. “Of course, it could require additional investment and it could be expensive, but we have to understand that some changes are required to reduce the risks to a community.”

Oil refiners took in at least \$2.4 billion from motorists in the first six months after the blast alone as gas prices soared, a recent study by the RAND think tank said.

Since the blast, activists have founded three grass-roots environmental groups whose members already have publicly voiced concerns over the same issues Lieu and Waters have now thrown their political clout behind.

Waters and Lieu also raised the issue of whether the consultant the AQMD has hired to perform the study has a potential conflict of interest, as some residents have suggested. The founder of the consulting company once worked for ExxonMobil.

AQMD officials have previously dismissed the idea they have any concerns over the consultant.

The letter from Lieu and Waters was released just before ExxonMobil was scheduled to restart the refinery sometime after 7 p.m. Monday and before 7 a.m. Tuesday to reduce public exposure to emissions, especially during the first six hours of the operation. However, pollution levels are not expected to endanger public health, officials have said.

Still, Torrance officials announced Monday that outdoor activities in the Early Childhood Education Program at McMaster Park will be moved inside today as a precaution.

It's unclear whether any additional information about the plant restart will be released unless some sort of problem arises.

Late Friday afternoon, ExxonMobil officials pulled the plug on a planned overnight start Saturday, telling the AQMD they weren't ready. No reason was given.

ExxonMobil is notoriously reticent to provide information to the community, AQMD offices are closed Monday and Torrance Fire Chief Martin Serna said the city has not ramped up staffing in case of an emergency.

ExxonMobil officials have said the company spent more than \$162 million to repair the damage from the blast and upgrade equipment.

The company has more than \$530 million riding on a successful restart and resumption of operations; that's how much PBF Energy will pay to buy the refinery in a previously announced deal.

However, ExxonMobil must demonstrate the plant can operate satisfactorily for 15 days before the deal will close.

Moure-Eraso and other industry experts have noted that, much like taking off or landing a commercial aircraft, a restart inherently is among the most risky operations that can be performed at a refinery.

“It’s definitely the most dangerous part of the operation of the (refinery),” said Jim Tarr, a member of the Torrance Refinery Action Alliance and owner of a Rolling Hills Estates-based company that evaluates toxic exposure from refineries and other industrial plants.

Indeed, to reduce the possibility of another blast or fire, ExxonMobil won permission to crank up the refinery without using the pollution-control equipment where the previous explosion originated.

AQMD has installed two air monitors near the refinery to measure pollution levels. Those can be accessed in real time at <https://xappprod.aqmd.gov/smsdatasite>.

Activists were concerned about a spike in particulate matter levels seen Friday; AQMD officials say they were incorrect figures attributed to issues with the newly installed equipment and do not reflect actual air quality measurements.